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The US Congress is renewing a push on legislation which Turkey has warned could devastate Washington's ties with one of its staunchest Nato allies.

Sponsors of a resolution branding the Ottoman empire's 1915-1923 massacres of Armenians as genocide have begun gathering backers for the measure, which has long been supported by Barack Obama, US president.

Ankara, which has frequently warned that the legislation could endanger both Turkish-US and Turkish-Armenian relations, halted an attempt to pass the legislation in 2007 after calling into question US use of its Incirlik airbase.

Mr Obama is confronted with a choice between breaking a campaign pledge or risking long-standing defence ties with a strategic ally.

Ali Babacan, Turkish foreign minister, said this week that Ankara would take a "positive" approach if Washington asked for help in its exit from Iraq. The US also wants more assistance from Turkey in Afghanistan. A Turkish delegation is in Washington to hammer home the message that the genocide resolution is "unacceptable" and would inflame public opinion.

Turkey's leaders are expected to raise the issue with Hillary Clinton, US secretary of state, when she visits Ankara tomorrow. They are likely to argue that passing the resolution would also derail a drive to mend relations between Turkey and Armenia, including moves to open the border. Mr Babacan says settlement is closer than at any point since 1915.

Members of Congress say US frustration with recent Turkish behaviour raises the chances of the resolution going through. In particular, the denunciation by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's prime minister, of Israel's Gaza offensive has angered Jewish and pro-Israel groups that supported Turkey behind the scenes in 2007.

Mr Obama promised during his election campaign "to recognise the Armenian genocide" were he to become president - a step that would have more impact than the House of Representatives' resolution.

A key moment will come on April 24, the official day of remembrance, which in previous years has seen former presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush refer respectively to "the deportations and massacres" and the "annihilation" of 1.5m Armenians.

But congressional backers of the resolution say they will formally introduce it before then.

"I don't think it serves our interests well to be complicit in Turkish denial of something that is historical fact," said Adam Schiff, a Democratic member of the House and one of the measure's chief sponsors.

Turkey denies systematic killings, and maintains thousands of Turks also died during the violent disintegration of the Ottoman empire.

The US state department has always fought the resolution, fearing its impact on relations with Turkey.

Discussing the 1915 massacres is no longer the taboo it once was in Turkey, but the "G-word", as Turkish diplomats refer to it, still provokes official outrage and a visceral reaction from nationalists.

The foreign ministry said Turkey expected "third parties" to avoid making talks with Armenia more difficult, but added: "There are no assurances in life."

Mark Steven Kirk, a Republican backer of the resolution who denounces the use of millions of dollars of Turkish "taxpayers' money" for "foreign lobbyists" fighting the measure, says the Incirlik base is less important now that the Obama administration plans to keep up to 50,000 troops in Iraq until the end of 2011.

But the administration says Incirlik is still significant for operations in Iraq - while acknowledging it has yet to make up its mind on the genocide resolution.

"Incirlik airbase has all the time been an important transit hub," says a senior state department official. But his comments on the genocide resolution were much more cautious than the Bush administration's admonitions against it.